

English Stage Company:

An Inventory of Correspondence at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center

Descriptive Summary

Creator: English Stage Company at the Royal Court Theatre

Title: English Stage Company at the Royal Court Theatre Correspondence

Dates: 1955-1959, nd

Extent: 0.5 box

Abstract: The correspondence is primarily with the office of the Lord Chamberlain regarding textual changes in certain plays.

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Language: English.

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Administrative Information

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Organizational History

The English Stage Company at the Royal Court Theatre in London was founded in 1955 by a governing council consisting of Ronald Duncan, Oscar Lewenstein, James Edward Blacksell, Benjamin Britten, and the Earl of Harewood. Well-to-do businessman Neville Blond served as chairman of the council until his death in 1970. George Devine was asked to be the company's artistic director, and he brought on Tony Richardson as his assistant. Although it was a distance from London's theater district, the Royal Court Theatre was chosen as the company's home when the original choice of the Kingsway Theatre in the West End proved to be too costly to repair.

The company's goal was to produce serious, contemporary, non-commercial works in order to stimulate new writing. The intent was not to be avant-garde, but to be a popular theater producing new plays that would have been rejected by the commercial theater. At the time, English theaters primarily presented formulaic thrillers and comedies or imports proven to succeed elsewhere; few original plays were produced unless they starred well-known actors. In contrast, Royal Court productions included first plays by young authors, as well as British premieres of works by Brecht, Ionesco, and other non-British playwrights. In addition, the Royal Court emphasized the text of the play, with an economy of production. Devine sought to reproduce the author's intentions rather than impose his own interpretations on a play's text, and this led to a close association between the director and the writer. The Royal Court became known as a writer's theater, and its tradition of loyalty to the text and its author has been continued by subsequent artistic directors.

During its first season in 1956, the Royal Court staged plays by first-time playwrights, imports of foreign works, and a revival of a forgotten English classic. The company's first production, Angus Wilson's *The Mulberry Bush*, opened at the Royal Court on 2 April 1956 and was followed a week later by Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. At first, plays were presented in repertory, but that format proved unsuccessful and was abandoned. *Look Back in Anger* was the first play to run alone when the plays running concurrently with it were dropped, and it became an overnight success after a portion of the production was broadcast on the radio. The play, a drama written by twenty-six-year-old John Osborne in direct, contemporary language about contemporary life in England, marked the appearance of the "angry young men" and revitalized English theater. The theater became a forum for discussing contemporary social, political, and intellectual issues.

The theater in England was subject to preproduction censorship until 1968, and the Lord Chamberlain was responsible for reviewing scripts and granting licenses for public performances. Due to the nature of its productions, the Royal Court Theatre frequently encountered opposition to its scripts from the Lord Chamberlain's office. As the intermediary between the office of the Lord Chamberlain and the playwrights, the Royal Court was involved in negotiations over changes to the texts. However, the theater's loyalty to the playwright meant that when authors refused to make required changes, the Royal Court did not press them but withdrew its application for a license. Over time, the changing social climate led to an ease in restrictions. In addition, publicity about the

Royal Court's "club theater" performances of plays denied licenses by the Lord Chamberlain's office assisted in bringing about the Theatres Act of 1968, which ended stage censorship.

Over the years, many leading dramatists and actors began their careers at the Royal Court, and today the Royal Court Theater maintains its reputation for producing challenging and innovative new works.

Sources: "The End of English Stage Censorship, 1945-1968", by Fred Crawford, and "The Royal Court Theatre and the English Stage Company," by Terry Browne, both in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, volume 13 (Detroit, Mich.: Gale Research Co., 1982), and the *International Dictionary of Theatre*, vol. 3 (Chicago: St. James Press, 1992-96). Further information may be found in Terry Browne, *Playwrights' Theatre: The English Stage Company at the Royal Court Theatre* (London: Pitman, 1975); Richard Findlater, ed., *At the Royal Court: 25 Years of the English Stage Company* (N.Y.: Grove Press, 1981); Richard Findlater, *Banned! A Review of Theatrical Censorship*; and Irving Wardle, *The Theatres of George Devine*, (London, 1978).

Scope and Contents

The Royal Court Theatre correspondence files date from 1955-1959 and primarily contain letters negotiating textual changes with the office of the Lord Chamberlain, but also include letters regarding translations, rights and permissions, and scheduling. Files are organized by playwright and contain correspondence with the office of the Lord Chamberlain, playwrights, translators, and agents. A list of all correspondents is provided at the end of this finding aid.

Among the plays referred to in the correspondence are John Arden's *Live Like Pigs* and *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance: An Unhistorical Parable*; Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*, *Acte sans paroles*, and *Fin de partie* and its English version, *Endgame*; Bertolt Brecht's *The Good Woman of Setzuan* and *The Threepenny Opera*; Nigel Dennis's *The Making of Moo: A History of Religion in Three Acts*; Ronald Duncan's *Don Juan*; Willis Hall's *The Long and the Short and the Tall*; Eugène Ionesco's *The Chairs*, *Victims of Duty*, *Maid to Marry*, *The Leader*, *The Bald Prima Donna*, and *Jack, or Obedience*; Carson McCullers' *The Member of the Wedding*; Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*; Sean O'Casey's *The Drums of Father Ned* and *Cock-a-Doodle Dandy*; John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, *Epitaph for George Dillon*, and *The Entertainer*; Barry Reckord's *Flesh to a Tiger*; and Tennessee Williams's *Orpheus Descending*.

Noteworthy items include rewritten text for *Flesh to a Tiger*, additional dialogue McCullers provided for *The Member of the Wedding*, correspondence regarding an English translation of Brecht's *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, and censorship correspondence with the Lord Chamberlain's office concerning Osborne's *Epitaph for George Dillon* and *The Entertainer*. John Arden provided alternative titles for *Live Like Pigs* and reluctantly made changes to *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance*. The Beckett file contains extensive correspondence between the theater company and both Beckett and the office of the Lord Chamberlain regarding censorship of *Fin de partie*, *Krapp's Last*

Tape, and *Endgame*, as well as letters from Beckett about translating *Fin de partie*. Beckett's opinions and willingness or refusal to negotiate changes are noted in his letters to George Devine. Other correspondence regarding censorship of *Endgame* includes letters from Mary Hutchinson and Robin McEwen, who attempted to sway the Lord Chamberlain's decision, as well as the Lord Chamberlain's reply. The close association between the director and the writer at the Royal Court is especially evident in the correspondence between Devine and Beckett.

Related materials at the HRHRC may be found in the Samuel Beckett, Gordon Dickerson, Ronald Duncan, Mary Hutchinson, John Lehmann, Carson McCullers, and John Osborne papers.

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MCA (England) Ltd.

England and Wales. Lord Chamberlain's Office

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